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ABSTRACT

This study examines the special situation of nonnative speakers of English who teach foreign languages at U.S. institution. It argues that modules designed specifically for mentoring international foreign language teaching assistants (IFLTAs) must be included in teaching assistant workshops and seminars offered by foreign language departments. Based on a survey conducted at a large Midwestern research university, the study examines common concerns raised by IFLTAs in three distinct categories: language, acculturation, and university policy. It addresses matters of English and target language usage in the classroom, cross-cultural exchange and its role in foreign language instruction, and the international TAs understanding of university policy vis-a-vis institutional regulations in their own countries. The International Graduate Associate Survey is appended. (Contains 17 endnotes and 34 references.) (Author/VWL)

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Meeting the Needs of International TAs in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Model for Extended Training

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Since the 1970s the number of international teaching assistants or associates* (international TAs or ITAs) has increased steadily at U.S. institutions. While administrators, faculty, and students today agree that international TAs enrich the cultural atmosphere of the U.S. classroom and offer new insights into course material (Pialorsi 1984; Welsh 1986), the employment of ITAs in the U.S. classroom was initially accompanied by widespread complaints from undergraduates and their parents about what came to be known as the "foreign TA problem" (Bailey 1982).[1] In response to the crisis centered on international TAs in the U.S. classroom, numerous scholars examined the fundamental challenges facing ITAs and proposed program initiatives that would help facilitate their transition into the U.S. system (Boyd 1989; Constantinides 1989; Franck and DeSousa 1980; Rice 1984; Turitz 1984).[2] Such studies were based on the premise that the language barrier, both in and outside of the classroom, was the primary challenge ITAs faced in the U.S. classroom, and programs assessing the TAs' linguistic ability were "rushed in" (Heller 1986, p. 9) to prevent further complaints from students and their parents. Ultimately, ESL departments were given the responsibility of designing training workshops and seminars that would prepare ITAs for the U.S. classroom culture by improving their English language skills. In addition, educators created handbooks to guide the ITAs' transition into the U.S. system.[3] These texts outline specific strategies to improve the ITAs' classroom experience by enhancing presentation skills and pronunciation and discussing the nature of higher education in the United States.

The dilemma of the ITA was heightened by the fact that the general public perceived the "problem" primarily as a linguistic one, defined by

*The terms "teaching assistants" and "teaching associates" are used interchangably in this study.

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pronunciation and fluency (Brown, Fishman, and Jones 1989). Early in the ITA debate, however, foreign language and ESL educators argued that the challenges facing the ITA reached beyond the issue of linguistic (in)competence and included cultural difference as an equally important aspect of ITA research and training (Bernhardt 1987; Landa and Perry 1984; Nelson 1989; Shaw and Garate 1984). Since the early 1980s, ITA training programs have "matured" (Rubin 1993, p. 184), and today most universities consider matters of culture, pedagogy, and North American university life in addition to language as necessary components of adequate ITA training (Hoekje and Williams 1992; Rubin 1993). Despite the considerable research devoted to the ITA programs and the "foreign TA problem," however, very little attention has been paid to a large group of international teaching assistants occupying a unique position in the debate: international graduate students who teach their native language and culture to U.S. students. While these international foreign language teaching assistants (IFLTAs) may experience culture shock in ways similar to their counterparts in other disciplines, IFLTAs who teach their native language and culture are faced with language and acculturation challenges different from those of their peers. While researchers emphasize the importance of recognizing "context" and "role" in preparing ITAs for the classroom (Hoekje and Williams 1992, p. 244), few studies have been devoted to the special circumstances of the international TA who is both the embodiment and mediator of foreign language course material. In general, IFLTAs are advised to take ESL classes if they need to improve their English skills, and/or they receive the same training as U.S.-born teaching assistants who already have an intimate understanding of the university environment in the United States.

This study examines the special situation of non-native speakers of English who teach foreign languages at U.S. institutions and argues that modules designed specifically for mentoring IFLTAs must be included in TA training workshops and seminars offered by foreign language departments. Based on a survey conducted at a large Midwestern research university, the study examines common concerns raised by IFLTAs in three distinct categories: language, acculturation, and university policy. It addresses matters of English and target language usage in the classroom, cross-cultural exchange and its role in foreign language instruction, and the international TAs' understanding of university policy vis-à-vis institutional regulations in their own countries. The study concludes with a model for training IFLTAs in the format of a six-week colloquium that begins with the dissemination of information before TAs arrive in the United States and serves as a continuation of the general pre-service workshop for all foreign language TAs in the autumn term.

The Survey

Qualitative data were gathered from a pool of 40 novice and experienced IFLTAs who were teaching the following languages at a large, land-grant institution: Arabic (1), Chinese (3), French (9), German (10), Italian (1), Japanese (5), Russian (3), and Spanish (8). The IFLTAs surveyed ranged in age from 22 to 52, with an average age of 29; respondents had resided in the United States from six months to ten years. The IFLTAs' teaching experience also ranged from six months to ten years. All of the students were currently enrolled in the departments in which they taught, with the majority seeking an M.A. or Ph.D. degree in linguistics and/or literature. In the questionnaire, IFLTAs evaluated their English skills with regard to the foreign language classroom and their use of English vis-à-vis the target language in class. They rated their understanding of the U.S. classroom environment, their role as a TA before entering the classroom, and students' reception of them and their culture. The IFLTAs also rated their understanding of university policies such as grading, academic misconduct, and sexual harassment and provided qualitative information regarding how they viewed the differences between institutions in their own country and universities in the United States.[4]

Language (In) Competence

The role of language ability versus intercultural and pedagogical skills in the classroom was already hotly debated with the development of ITA training programs twenty years ago. Indeed, research in ITA production reveals that the importance of language and pronunciation in the ITA's ability to succeed in the U.S. classroom cannot be underestimated (Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler 1988; Gallego 1990; Tyler 1992; Williams 1992). While a "language-first" strategy[5] served and, to some extent, still serves as a logical starting point for the training of international teaching associates, language training does not address the most immediate or fundamental needs of IFLTAs. For the ITA who does not teach a foreign language, English is the language of the classroom and involves linguistic formulations with which the ITA's native language often interferes. For IFLTAs, however, the target language for the classroom is, in fact, their native tongue. In the survey conducted for this study, 60% of the IFLTAs felt strongly that their English was adequate for teaching in the U.S. classrooms while at least 40% agreed that their skills were adequate; this results in a total of 100% who felt their English was sufficient for classroom use. Furthermore, 69% reported that they did not experience difficulties while trying to communicate with their students in English, while only 21% experienced some difficulty.

These results may appear unusual considering the degree of negative assessment of ITA language ability found repeatedly in the literature and in ITAs' low self-assessments (Fragiadakis 1988; Smith 1993). They may be attributed, however, to unique characteristics of IFLTAs. First, international foreign language teaching assistants are themselves language learners, often studying their own language and literature or that of another culture in depth. As members of humanities departments in their own countries, they are skilled writers and manipulators of linguistic constructions. Some of them have come to the United States to study English and American culture; however, many, in fact, the majority of IFLTAs, have come to the United States to pursue a degree in foreign language and literature studies at an American institution and to examine their culture from a different perspective.[6] Because these TAs have studied their own language in detail, often their English skills are better than those of their counterparts in other disciplines, such as in math and the sciences, who do not work with language as their daily research medium.

Another reason for the IFLTAs' high assessment of their language ability may stem from the fact that they do not have to rely on English as the sole medium through which they express course material. They are expected to use the target language in class in order to teach it and therefore must not rely on English as the sole medium with which they teach their daily lesson. Forty-five percent of the IFLTAs said they never used English in the classroom for clarification purposes. By avoiding the use of English in the classroom, IFLTAs have met one of their program's standards for success: use of the target language as the teaching medium. As Polio and Duff (1994) explain, part of the IFLTAs' role is to facilitate use of the target language to provide an exemplary model of the language, and to offer authentic usage of the target language in the classroom. The IFLTAs' reliance on their native language, however, often presents difficulty when they are asked to clarify a grammar point in English. As Salomone points out, for IFLTAs, "language problems are often related to communication about their native language" (1998, p. 553). International foreign language teaching assistants who teach their native language often find it difficult to explain concepts in English because they do not have the vocabulary to do so. One of the IFLTAs surveyed commented:

> At the beginning of the year it was really easy for me to respect the use of the target language in class because I did not feel confident enough to use English. But now that I speak better the language, I switch more frequently in English when they do not get it the first time in French, which is not good for the "cultural" environment we have to maintain in class.

Initially this IFLTA relied on explanations in the target language because her English skills were weak, offering students, as Polio and Duff remark, "opportunities to process communicative TL internally and to express and resolve comprehension problems in the target language" (1994, p. 322). Eventually, however, she switches to English to explain complex concepts, a phenomenon that occurs frequently among IFLTAs. In their 1994 study, Polio and Duff argue that IFLTAs often abandon the target language and revert to English in the foreign language classroom, citing eight categories of usage.[7] Fifty-three percent of the IFLTAs surveyed reported a heavy reliance on English to explain concepts in class although their departments expected TAs to teach in the target language. By speaking English, IFLTAs often hope to facilitate students' comprehension of difficult concepts, assuming that the explanation they give is more comprehensible in English than in the target language. As Polio and Duff contend, however, this practice often leads to more confusion because of the teachers' non-native proficiency (1994, p. 321). Using English in class may help the IFLTA establish a good rapport with students and create a comfortable atmosphere (Polio and Duff 1994, p. 318). If, however, students do not have the opportunity to grapple with difficult concepts and miscommunications in the target language, they are less likely to develop suitable strategies for negotiating meaning in the target language outside of the classroom.

Often IFLTAs' difficulty in explaining complex grammar points stems from the fact that they do not know the grammatical rules that underlie the subtleties of their native language (Gutiérrez 1987, p. 28). For example, many native speakers experience difficulty when trying to explain the rules of usage for prepositions and the appropriate cases and verbs that accompany them. A native German TA, when asked to explain why the preposition "an" and the dative case are used in the phrase *"Sie sitzt am Tisch"* (*She's sitting at the table*), may not immediately consider spatial (i.e., vertical) orientation and the static position of the subject as factors determining the grammatical construction because she is not familiar with or does not understand the rules governing usage and case when dealing with prepositions. The difficulty that she experiences when trying to explain difficult grammatical rules or certain idiomatic expressions may stem from the fact that her knowledge about the language is intuitive, not cognitive; "it is difficult for [native speakers] to explain a grammar point that 'just sounds right'" (Salomone 1998, p. 553). By contrast, the U.S.-born TA who learned German as a second language is more likely to explain the rules of usage much as she learned them, in terms of cognitive rules rather than intuition.

Another problem IFLTAs experience when using English stems from the interference of their native language when clarifying abstract points. For example, students of German or French may ask the IFLTA to clarify the difference between the present perfect and past tenses. The German TA may say that the present perfect *"ich habe gemacht"* (*I made/I did*) is synonymous with the English present perfect *"I have made/I have done."* Here, because of interference from his or her native language, the IFLTA makes an erroneous connection between the English verb form and its German correlate, forms that actually have two different meanings. When the IFLTA attempts to explain a point and uses a faulty example from English based on interference from the target language, students grasp the incorrect phrase as a point of orientation. Not realizing the TA has inadvertently made a mistake, the student associates the meaning of the word or phrase that was translated incorrectly with the meaning of a word or phrase in the target language. While ITAs in other disciplines may make mistakes in English while explaining aspects of the course content, their students focus less on the language errors than on the concept being explained. In the case of the IFLTA, when students overlook a mistake, it may really indicate that they are assigning the wrong meaning to a newly learned concept.

Ultimately, linguistic competence does not necessarily imply competent teaching. It has often been assumed that because international foreign language teaching assistants possess native ability in the subject matter they teach, they can present the course material without difficulty. However, native fluency can lead to a false sense of security about the requirements for mediating the subject matter in the classroom. IFLTAs, by reason of their intimate connection to the target culture and native knowledge of the language, are experts in the subject matter they teach, but despite their intuitive expertise, they must still learn teaching skills in order to mediate the course material.

Acculturation

Cultural differences represent the most diverse group of challenges with which all ITAs are confronted. While they are informed prior to their arrival in the United States about expectations concerning their linguistic competence, and measures are taken to assess non-native speakers' language abilities (Yule and Hoffman 1990), ITAs generally have little or no knowledge about the classroom prior to coming to the United States. Logically, international TAs first begin to gain this knowledge through their experiences in the classroom. Research indicates, however, that most ITAs need a greater understanding of the

learning atmosphere and the student body before they enter the classroom, and that programs should be developed to meet this need (Bernhardt 1987; Hoekje and Williams 1992; Nelson 1989; Pialorsi 1984; Shaw and Garate 1984).[8] In fact, ITA training programs are most successful when they consider "social relationships, language appropriateness, and context" (Hoekje and Williams 1992, p. 246), all aspects of intercultural mentorship. Even if ITAs have had teaching experience prior to coming to the United States, they must relearn their role as a teacher in the U.S. context, a process that can be more challenging for experienced than for first-time teachers (Landa and Perry 1994). Because teaching involves deeply rooted values, changing someone's teaching to adapt to the U.S. culture is not the same kind of adjustment as donning culturally appropriate attire in a foreign country (Nelson 1990, p. 15). Differing opinions about education and culture affect the relationship of students and ITAs and their roles in the classrooms (Hoekje and Williams 1992), and while instruments have been developed to measure culturally differing attitudes toward education, overt differences between the ways U.S. undergraduates and ITAs view education are difficult to discern.[9]

In response to the need for a better understanding of the classroom climate, many handbooks for ITAs include a description of higher education in the United States.[10] These manuals cannot, however, prepare ITAs for the individual interactions they will have on a daily basis as a teacher. Most ITAs experience anxiety about entering the classroom because they are expected to be effective communicators with students about whom they know relatively little and with whom they do not share cultural heritage, native language, or views on the nature of university education (Franck and DeSousa 1980). Even if they are provided with some literature about students at U.S. universities, ultimately most ITAs will experience a type of "culture shock" in their first weeks or months in the U.S. classroom. One of the IFLTAs surveyed for this study recalled her first days in the classroom:

> I did have moment of culture shock but I don't think somebody can help you with this—it is just a normal thing you have to experience and it is up to you if you will go through with it.

For most ITAs, the classroom atmosphere in the United States is much more informal than in their native country, and their teaching style appears at times stiff and overly formal to their American students. U.S. classes are based on the concept of dialogue rather than one-way transference and, as Sarkisian points out, "in the United States, it is generally assumed that students will learn more in class if they are given chances to be actively involved with the material they are taught rather

than only listen to lectures and take notes" (1997, p. 20). This method of classroom instruction varies from more formal systems, for example, in Europe and Asia, where pure lecturing is a widely practiced form of instruction. In many cases, faculty and TAs in the United States enjoy informal relationships with their students and embrace an attitude of open dialogue. Personal interaction between students and instructors is also very different from what international TAs may have experienced in their own country and may lead to conflict for them vis-à-vis their classroom persona. Although American students enjoy the freedom of debate, they often expect to be handled in a sensitive matter during discussion. They in turn soften commands by saying "would you please" or "would you mind" as a measure of politeness and seek less formal dialogues with their instructors (Smith 1993). They may also expect a similar measure of informality and politeness from instructors in the form of positive feedback and praise (Pialorsi 1984), a practice to which international TAs may be less accustomed in their home institution. One IFLTA surveyed for this study wrote the following:

> I think for me the biggest problem is that I didn't know what American students expect of their teachers. In my home culture that I was brought up in, if a teacher is strict with me, it means she cares about me and takes me seriously, and she hopes I can do better. But here, when I was strict with my students—e.g., only Chinese in class, no delay for homework, a lot of exercise in and out of class—some students hated me. They didn't like me to be strict with them and thought I was finding fault with them. I guess this was my "culture shock." I wish there were people who told me how American students are treated in elementary, secondary, and high school and what they like their teacher to do.

In addition to the classroom atmosphere, the culture of the university as a whole is unfamiliar to international TAs. Often they are unaware of the demographic makeup of the student body or the educational background of the students in their class. Pialorsi concludes, "Recognizing that students' educational backgrounds are in some ways similar but in many ways different should facilitate the ITAs' efforts to communicate with and understand their U.S. students" (1984, p. 20). While ITAs eventually gain an understanding of their students' abilities during the course of a semester, they are not prepared for their students' strengths and weaknesses and thus cannot use this knowledge to their advantage while planning the instruction of the course. Since the demographic makeup and educational background of students vary from university to university, new ITAs must seek guidance from experienced faculty and TAs, both foreign and native, about the background

of students at their institutions and particular challenges associated with meeting their academic needs.

Like other ITAs, 50% of language IFLTAs surveyed for the study felt that they did not have a good grasp of the characteristics of the students and the demographic makeup of the university.[11] The IFLTAs had many of the same concerns discussed above; however, as language teachers and mediators of culture, they also experienced challenges different from those of their colleagues in other disciplines. Often ITAs feel they must assimilate to the U.S. classroom and its culture in order to improve mediation of the course material and to understand their students. Pialorsi states, "The foreign TA must undergo a process of acculturation in order to be effective in the U.S. classroom. In other words, he or she must 'become more like us' in order to function" (1984, p. 17). In the case of international foreign language TAs, however, assimilation is a more difficult and also more undesirable strategy. Because they are viewed as the embodiment of the culture about which they teach, to assimilate would mean to lose, in part, the authenticity of the course designed to enlighten students about the language and culture of the IFLTA's native country. One IFLTA surveyed cites difficulty in retaining the atmosphere of the Japanese culture (which is encouraged by her department) while interacting with her students in the informal manner of the U.S. classroom.

> Relationships between teachers and students are more formal in Japan, and while I'd like to teach students about Japanese culture (including formal relations with teachers), I also hope to create friendly learning environments, and it is not easy for me to balance Japanese culture and American university culture sometimes.

Ultimately, IFLTAs must focus on their culture as the subject matter of the course and the point of interaction with the students, although sometimes an aspect of this culture, e.g., teaching style, is deemed cold or uninviting by U.S. students, thus potentially leading them to lose interest in the subject matter. Unlike classes taught by ITAs in other disciplines, the classroom dialogue of the foreign language and culture classroom is founded to a large degree on the IFLTAs' "otherness." For IFLTAs it is difficult to adopt American mannerisms and culture when the students look to them as perhaps the most tangible link to the culture about which they are learning. While this emphasis on the IFLTA's foreignness inhibits assimilation and may seem to create a gap between students and instructor, it can also lead to a dialogue in which they discuss their cultures in terms of difference rather than assimilation. IFLTAs must learn how to capitalize on this difference and know when to emphasize similarities between their culture and that of the

United States. Whereas the foreignness of the ITA is often considered a hindrance to instruction in terms of linguistic ability and classroom interaction, in foreign language instruction the IFLTA's "insider" view as a native enriches the students' classroom experience.

Policy

Most U.S. TAs will have approximately seventeen years of experience with the operation, philosophy, financial structure, and goals of the U.S. educational system (K–12 + post-secondary education) by the time they enter the U.S. classroom to teach. Similarly, they will be familiar with institutional policies governing education at U.S. universities, such as grading, academic misconduct, and sexual harassment. For many international TAs, however, these policies will seem foreign because such regulations do not exist at institutions in their country or are not discussed in the same way. While studies in ITA training typically cite culture, pedagogy, and language as three fundamental components of ITA preparation (Barnes et al. 1989; Hoekje and Williams 1992), few mention specific training in university policy. In fact, often the workshops for international teaching assistants parallel those for native speakers (Plakans 1997),[12] implying that with regard to university policy, international TAs receive the same training as their U.S.-born counterparts despite their greater inexperience. In addition to topics requiring more in-depth training for ITAs such as the philosophy of U.S. institutions, student demographics, financing education in the United States, and cultural stereotypes (Bernhardt 1987), university policy is another category in which ITAs require special guidance. Preservice workshops lasting one to two weeks do not usually provide ample time to discuss policy issues at length, and while ITAs may be given literature describing university standards for grading procedures, incompletes/ failures, rosters, attendance, and syllabi or policies such as racial discrimination, sexual harassment, or academic misconduct, such guides do not take into account the linguistic ability of the ITAs, nor do they offer ways in which individuals should respond to specific classroom settings. One of the IFLTAs surveyed writes:

> The paper work sent to me from the department regarding teaching responsibilities and credit hours made absolutely no sense to me. It was difficult to accept that I should just know what this meant. It was addressed to an American reader.

ITAs do not always feel amply prepared through reading alone for situations they will encounter and therefore may unwittingly become involved in a conflict concerning one or more of the above issues.

Matters governed by university policy are difficult to define, often even for U.S.-born faculty and TAs, because they overlap with notions of culture. For example, tardiness is a complex issue related to both policy and culture. For most instructors in the United States, punctuality is a matter of respect; students who come late are to be reprimanded because they disturb other students, miss important information, and inhibit the smooth flow of class activities in an effort to get caught up. While most instructors address the problem of latecomers, punctuality cannot be considered a matter of *policy* unless it is made a graded component of the overall course assessment. Therefore students who consistently come late to class in the United States overstep a cultural boundary but do not necessarily undermine academic policy. For international TAs accustomed to seminars beginning *cum tempore*,[13] enforcing classroom rules concerning tardiness may seem exaggerated or unnecessary, particularly if there is no policy explicitly stating university practices. Even if ITAs understand university standards, it often contradicts what they have learned in the educational system of their own culture. For example, 52% of the IFLTAs surveyed for this study reported that universities in their country do not have a formulated sexual harassment policy and 24% said they did not know if such a policy exists or how it works. Similarly, of the IFLTAs who responded to questions on academic misconduct, 48% said that "cheating" was looked down upon or penalized in their country, while 35% said that it was culturally accepted and not punished based on university policy. This view is summarized by the comment of one TA:

> Cheating is a part of everyday teaching/taking exams. Often cheaters are considered "smart" when they cheat and don't get caught.

For many ITAs, "cheating" is an accepted practice in academic culture; whether it is right or wrong is a decision that is "left up to the teacher." Because of this very different cultural gauge, actions taken in the United States to guard against and penalize academic misconduct seem distorted or overly strict:

> Cheating is normal. I mean, it's not the worst thing in the world. I was really surprised by the situation here.

For ITAs, stringent university policies often conflict with the cultural norms that shaped their academic careers prior to coming to the United States. Thus they may be less likely to take appropriate action or even recognize when students in their class violate university policy because such violations do not directly contradict their notion of culturally acceptable behavior.

Policies on sexual harassment also present both cultural and, in the worst case, legal challenges for ITAs. For many of them, concepts of personal space in their culture often conflict with that of U.S. undergraduates, leading ITAs to take a very distant and detached approach to their students out of fear that their behavior might be perceived as unacceptable or offensive.

> The notion of space is limited in France. When I stand close to my students [in the U.S.], they feel uncomfortable. I ask them why, and they say "nervousness, you are too close to me." I tell them I am sorry, France is a small country. Here everything is over-exaggerated. If a student does well and I want to pat her on the shoulder and say "good job" I don't do it because I am afraid of sexual harassment. I know sexual harassment starts very quickly, but where does it stop?

Based on their understanding of sexual harassment policies, many ITAs are very concerned about their proximity to students, how their body language is perceived, and the legal repercussions these perceptions might have. While many ITAs are aware of such policies, it is often difficult for them to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not, a dilemma that usually results in a "safe," but more unnatural, approach to their students.

It is in terms of university policy that international foreign language teaching assistants are most similar to their counterparts in other disciplines. Unlike their peers, however, they are faced with the decision of how much of their native culture to carry over into the U.S. classroom as an aspect of authentic learning. As the embodiment and mediators of practices in their country, IFLTAs are compelled to introduce as much of their native culture as possible into the classroom. Teaching U.S. undergraduates provides them with the opportunity to share knowledge of subject matter with which they are intimately connected, creating a unique moment of cultural exchange. The manner in which IFLTAs mediate cultural knowledge, however, is often made more complicated or confusing by their students' different cultural norms and university rules governing class procedures and teacher-student relations. The lack of knowledge concerning acceptable interactions with regard to both language and behavior not only creates a challenge during communication, as Tyler (1994) points out, but also in the day-to-day functions of IFLTAs in the foreign language classroom. Often they must make difficult choices about the degree to which the target culture, including classroom practices, can be instituted in the U.S. classroom. For example, while teaching her students formal and informal forms of address and greetings, a French TA also

informs students of methods of greeting and physical proximity in French culture. Given notions of privacy and the respect of physical space and their link to the concept of sexual harassment, the IFLTA is reluctant to impart to her students the practice of kissing on the cheek common among friends and family in France. In addition, because of U.S. institutional policy, she fears that it may not be appropriate to demonstrate the practice herself with students or to ask students to do so with each other. Instead, based on advice from a language coordinator, she can request the help of a colleague, either a native speaker or one who has spent significant time in the culture, to demonstrate the ritual. In this manner she does not infringe upon students' notion of space, nor does she feel concerned that she has transgressed policies set forth by the university, but still feels she has imparted a very important aspect of French culture.

Similarly, a Russian TA who is accustomed to subjective forms of grading at her home institution does not immediately understand the importance of assigning and recording grade values for both qualitative and quantitative assessments in class.[14] While she retains test grades, as is done in Russia, she views attendance and evaluations of oral skills, not as numerical components of an overall grade, but as loose categories in which she assigns a more subjective value. According to her model, oral assessments are not determined by proficiency; rather a student's gregarious personality or degree of effort serves as her primary evaluative measures. The fact that this ITA is a foreign language instructor complicates the scenario because she is required to give assessments that naturally call for more open-ended and subjective forms of evaluation.[15] Here the TA's cultural understanding of grading in Russia conflicts with her view of grading policies set forth by the department. Ultimately IFLTAs must learn, in an ongoing mentoring forum, about the intersection of cultures within the classroom—when it is appropriate to implement aspects of the foreign culture in the classroom and when U.S. policies and culture take precedence. Only when the mediation of linguistic and cultural knowledge occurs within the framework of university policy can education in the foreign language classroom be deemed successful.

The Workshop

We now turn to our proposed IFLTA training model according to which ongoing mentorship would take place in the form of a six-week colloquium during the IFLTAs' first term of teaching. The workshop would serve as the continuation of an initial, two week pre-service workshop in which both international and U.S.-born TAs, from all of

the language departments participate. The workshop would be offered as a series of colloquium meetings devoted to each of the three issues discussed above: language, acculturation, and university policy. Because IFLTAs are generally required to take a full courseload as part of their requirements for funding, the workshop would not be offered for credit. By arranging the colloquium meetings as a brown bag lunch series or informal afternoon meetings, the mentors would encourage IFTLAs to view the workshop as a support group rather than a course.[16] Incentives for participation would include firsthand experience in dealing with issues of academic misconduct, sexual harassment, and discrimination through roleplaying; videotapes of and interviews with experienced IFLTAs in class; roundtable discussions with experts from foreign language education, the ESL department, and university administrative offices. Students would also receive a letter of participation for their personnel file. Costs for the workshop would be minimal, stemming primarily from the creation of materials (handouts, video/audio cassettes, mailings, and equipment). The foreign language departments, the college in which they are housed, and an international studies office would provide workshop funding.

Organization and Materials

The workshop would be organized by a team of TA "mentors" with peer coordinating experience; in other words, TAs who have assisted the undergraduate language program director by coordinating one or more of the language levels. The experienced TAs would work in conjunction with foreign language program directors and a coordinating administrative unit such as the foreign language or learning center or a department that organizes workshops for teaching assistants.[17] By having a team of mentors, IFLTAs could benefit from large group discussions as well as smaller, break-out meetings. Prior to coming to the United States, IFLTAs would receive a handbook designed for nonnative speakers of English that would contain general information about education in the United States, the demographic makeup of students at the university, enrollment procedures, and TA responsibilities. In addition, the handbook would discuss the unique situation of IFLTAs as mediators of their culture to a population that may have little experience with foreign languages and practices, in terms of what they should expect from their students, how the U.S. language class functions, and foreign language classroom demography. The handbook would also include readings discussing life as an ITA with testimonials from IFLTAs specifically addressing the challenges they faced as new TAs. Finally, IFLTAs would receive a video with segments including

experienced IFLTAs teaching a class; interviews with IFLTAs discussing their impressions of the university and students; helpful tips presented by representatives from university and departmental offices discussing what the IFLTA can expect upon arrival in the United States.

Meeting Format

Each session during the six week workshop would consist of a large group discussion about the new IFLTAs' teaching experiences; classroom situations would act as a springboard for conversation. In addition, participants would hear brief talks given by representatives of university offices (Disability Services, Academic Affairs, Sexual Harassment Prevention, International Education) after which they would be asked to act out scenarios in which they must address conflicts concerning grading disputes, academic misconduct, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Two panel discussions with experienced IFLTAs in the third and fifth weeks, and one with undergraduate language students during the fourth week, would provide new IFLTAs with a forum in which to discuss their questions and concerns. At this time they would be able to inquire about U.S. culture, working with students in a group setting, and ways to incorporate aspects of their culture in the classroom in a non-threatening manner.

Extended Mentorship

In addition to the six week workshop, IFLTAs would take part in a yearlong extended mentoring program in which new IFLTAs are paired with an experienced IFLTA and an experienced American FLTA. The experienced TAs, both domestic and international, act as mentors throughout the academic year, thus providing the new TA with ongoing support and feedback in subsequent academic terms. The IFLTAs would meet with their mentors on a regular basis, keep a journal of challenges and successes throughout the year, and discuss these issues on a weekly basis. This one-on-one work relationship would also provide IFLTAs with opportunities to improve their English conversation skills. At the end of the year, all of the new IFLTAs would be brought together along with their mentors to discuss the year's experiences. At this time, TA mentors or coordinating staff would collect new information for the following year's handbook, conduct interviews with IFLTAs who have just completed the program for the following year's video, and begin talking with the IFLTAs about their ideas for mentoring the class of new language teachers. In this way the mentoring system would be rejuvenated year after year, creating a network of support and knowledge for the new IFLTAs when they arrive at the university.

Conclusion

While many of the challenges that international teaching assistants encounter at U.S. institutions are universal, issues of language, acculturation, and university policy take on a new meaning for international teaching assistants who teach foreign languages. Because the presence of IFLTAs on campus and in the classroom is fundamental to the incorporation of authenticity in foreign language education and to the cultural and linguistic development of non-native speakers of foreign languages, they will continue to be recruited to U.S. programs in the future. It is, therefore, imperative that training particularly designed to guide IFLTAs be implemented at both large research institutions and smaller universities and colleges. While ESL programs can help these TAs develop their English skills, they need additional training in teaching their own language and learning about when it is appropriate to incorporate elements of authentic culture into their classroom instruction. By working with skilled faculty and language program directors and coordinators who both understand the methods of foreign language instruction and the unique aspects of the U.S. university system, IFLTAs can learn to offer quality instruction that does not "shock" their students, thus encouraging them to continue their study of a foreign language.

Notes

1. In the October 1986 edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Michael Welsh, assistant provost of the University of South Carolina at Columbia, refers to the pervasiveness of the problem at U.S. institutions: "Students and parents and legislators are complaining about them. Board members and presidents are hearing about them, and academic officers are troubled by them" (Welsh, p. 55).
2. See Nelson (1990) for an overview of the literature on ITA training programs.
3. Examples include *The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual* (Byrd, Constantinides, and Pennington 1989), *Teaching Matters* (Pica, Barnes, and Finger 1990), and *Teaching American Students* (Sarkisian 1997).
4. For a more detailed view of the survey, see Appendix A.
5. Shaw and Granate offer an example of a "language-first" approach in their proposed "ESP" program, "English for Special Purposes" (1984, p. 29), which addresses the need for classroom survival skills in English.
6. Nearly all of the IFLTAs surveyed for this study were pursuing a graduate degree in the language department in which they were teaching, with the exception of those few who were in the United States on short-term exchange programs. Students who initially came on an exchange program

often enrolled in the degree program after one year. Even if the IFLTAs surveyed were not pursuing a degree, in order to receive funding, they had to be enrolled in language and literature courses in their department. This enrollment policy vis-à-vis funding appears to be a trend at most research institutions around the country, although occasionally IFLTAs receive funding as a language teacher while pursuing a degree in another department.

7. Duff and Polio's categories are based on the function of the items produced (e.g., for administrative purposes, grammar instruction, classroom management, etc.), the difficulty of the target language at a particular time, and the interactive effect involving students' use of English (p. 317).
8. More recently, classroom communication workshops have been offered to help ITAs with cultural interaction. These workshops help ITAs develop verbal and nonverbal behavior used both in and out of class, and teach them how to use typical American allusions in illustrating points and interpret group dynamics (Rubin 1993).
9. Aspects of the U.S. classroom culture include but are not limited to register and forms of address, manner of enunciation, concepts of personal space and professional distance, classroom etiquette, teaching practices, academic expectations, and views on education in general.
10. Examples include *The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual* (Byrd, Constantinides, Pennington 1989), *Teaching Matters* (Pica, Barnes, and Finger 1990), and *Teaching American Students* (Sarkisian 1997).
11. They expressed surprise or confusion about the behavior of American students and the U.S. classroom climate, noting students' lack of respect and self-motivation, their lack of seriousness with regard to their education despite high tuition costs, their negative reaction to instructor strictness, and the apparent pampering of the students by the educational system.
12. Plakans explains that such workshops place more emphasis on language competence and the culture of the classroom (e.g., attitudes toward students, answering questions, and views of minority and women students) but does not list university policy as a component that receives greater attention with regard to ITAs.
13. In many countries, such as Germany and India, seminars or lectures officially begin fifteen minutes after the hour. In other countries, such as France, students are accustomed to professors coming late to class.
14. At the time of this scenario, the TA was employed in her first quarter of teaching and did not understand the strict departmental rules regarding grading procedures and recordkeeping.
15. ITAs teaching in any discipline requiring open-ended or subjective forms of grading would potentially encounter a similar dilemma.
16. An ongoing workshop could be offered for course credit; however TAs may have to take it as an overload, based on departmental requirements for funding. In any case IFLTAs would not be graded for their participation

but would be encouraged to bring in questions or materials from class to discuss with their peers in a large group setting.

17. Ideally, most TA mentors would have had some experience as a peer coordinator or course section leader. They would participate in an orientation workshop prior to the beginning of fall term. At this time they would examine together the challenges of language, acculturation, and university policy facing IFLTAs. They would review university policies and discuss roleplaying scenarios to be used during the workshop. They would develop handouts and gather readings for a packet to be distributed to IFLTAs at the first meeting. If the workshop is offered for credit or is implemented in smaller programs, faculty or staff would be responsible for organizing and executing the course.

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APPENDIX A

International Graduate Associate Survey

Background

Country of Origin: _____

Months/Years in the U.S.: _____

Language(s) you teach: _____

Months/Years of experience: _____

Female _____ Male _____ Age _____

Area of study/degree program _____

Travel abroad (list exchange programs and/or extended stays in foreign countries):

_____

Why did you come to the U.S.?

_____

_____

Survey

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences as a teaching associate at the Ohio State University. Any additional comments are welcome. There are two sides.

SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree D=Disagree
SD=Strongly Disagree NA =Not Applicable

1) My English skills were adequate for teaching a language class at OSU.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
2) I experienced difficulties while trying to communicate with my students in English.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
3) I was required to take the TOEFL and/or an ESL class upon entering the university.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

4) My target language interfered with my ability to communicate with students in English.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
5) I spoke English in class while clarifying difficult ideas instead of communicating in the target language.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

Acculturation

1) I understood my responsibilities as a GTA before entering the classroom.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
2) I had a good grasp of the characteristics of the students and the demographic makeup of OSU before entering the classroom.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
3) I understood concepts of U.S. classroom environment (e.g. concepts of space, politeness, classroom etiquette, etc.).	SA	A	D	SD	NA
4) My understanding of appropriate classroom behavior was similar to that of my students (concerning attire, food, attitude, learning atmosphere, posture).	SA	A	D	SD	NA
5) My students understood and respected the country of my origin and its culture.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

University Policy

1) I had a good grasp of OSU grading procedures before entering the classroom.	SA	A	D	SD	NA
2) I understood the importance of grades vis-à-vis the learning process for U.S. students.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

Explain differences between U.S. grading policies and those in your own country. What is most important in your country (grades, learning the material, other)?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3)	I understood and agreed with university policies such as attendance, exam proctoring, enrollments.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

How important is attendance at universities in your country? Are students penalized for missing classes?

_____

_____

_____

_____

4)	I was aware of and understood policies concerning academic misconduct.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

Do institutions in your country have an academic misconduct policy? How is "cheating" viewed by students, faculty, the university?

_____

_____

_____

_____

5)	I was aware of and understood policies concerning sexual harassment.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

Do institutions in your country have a sexual harassment policy?

How does this policy differ from polices or practices in the U.S.?

_____

_____

_____

_____

6)	My department offered training on university policies such as academic misconduct and sexual harassment.	SA	A	D	SD	NA

Please comment on any challenges you experienced with regard to any of the above categories. Consider university policies, moments of "culture shock," and conflicts you may have felt with regard to policies at institutions in your own country. Include the category to which you found it most difficult to adjust and why. We are particularly interested in hearing your comments about and reactions to university policy issues in the U.S.

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